

# Margaret Clarke's *Mary And Brigid*, 1917: Mother Ireland In Irish Art And Nationalism. <sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This article reconstructs the history of an oil painting, *Mary and Brigid*, which was discovered in storage in 1996 at Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU), Halifax, Nova Scotia. Painted in 1917 by the renowned Irish artist, Margaret Clarke (Royal Hibernian Academy, RHA), at the height of the Irish Cultural Renaissance in early 20th century Ireland, *Mary and Brigid* highlights a significant intersection between Irish culture and politics, where Irish women played central roles. The primary aim of this research paper is to contextualize the work, as well as the artist herself - historically, culturally and politically.

## RÉSUMÉ

Cet article retrace l'histoire d'une peinture à l'huile, *Mary and Brigid*, qui fut découverte en entreposage à l'université Mount Saint Vincent (MSVU) Halifax, Nouvelle-Ecosse. Cette toile fut peinte en 1917, par l'illustre artiste irlandaise, Margaret Clarke (Royal Hibernian Academy, RHA), au début du 20ème siècle. *Mary and Brigid* souligne un important croisement entre la culture et la politique irlandaise, où les femmes ont joué un rôle important. L'objectif primordial de cet article est de mettre dans un contexte historique, culturel et politique l'oeuvre ainsi que l'artiste elle-même.



Photo: Ted Misztela.

## INTRODUCTION: THE DISCOVERY OF AN IRISH TREASURE

In May of 1996, several Nova Scotian artists were invited to visit the art storage area of Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU) to make a selection of the works for the 25th anniversary of the MSVU Art Gallery. There, Halifax artist Bernice Purdy was "most intrigued" by a torn and undocumented oil painting of a *Madonna & child* subject (Purdy 1996). Her queries led Ingrid Jenkner, MSVU Art Gallery Director, on a research adventure which continues to this day.

Initially, the only clue available was the engraving on the brass plate affixed to the frame which read: *Mary and Brigid, Inisheer, Aran Islands Margaret N. Clarke, R.H.A.* The knowledge that R.H.A. stood for Royal Hibernian Academy led Jenkner to the Irish National Gallery in Dublin, and the discovery that Clarke was a highly respected Irish portraitist.

Following other consultations, Jenkner discovered that this painting, *Mary & Brigid*, had left Ireland sometime in the mid to late 1920s, and that its whereabouts were now of some interest to Irish art historians, as well as to Clarke's family. Having been exhibited in three Dublin venues *Mary and Brigid* is well documented, although few Irish art scholars have seen the painting itself. Its discovery raised many questions and kept local, national and even international media intrigued for a period (MacDonald 1996; Smulders 1996; *Ireland's Own* 1996). How had *Mary and Brigid* made its way to MSVU?

In late November of 1996, a clue was unearthed in the course of Ingrid Jenkner's consultations with the Sisters of Charity (SC). Sister Mary Olga recalled that President Catherine Wallace (SC) had begun in the mid-1960s to plan an art gallery for Mount Saint Vincent. The Mount Archives housed a file on this project, which included correspondence between Sister Carmel and Mr. John C. Shelley, a chartered accountant in Winnipeg. Shelley was of Irish descent, and had apparently travelled to Ireland annually. He donated *Mary and Brigid* to the fledgling Mount art collection in 1967 (MSVU Archives). Yet, little is known currently about how it came into his possession.

Now displayed in the MSVU library foyer, *Mary and Brigid* contains a mystery which future research in Ireland and Canada may well illuminate. However, while such details remain interesting, this article will explore the historical significance of *Mary and Brigid* by locating the painting as well as the artist in cultural and political contexts and by suggesting an explanation for the subject of this striking work.

### **MARY AND BRIGID: FEMALE IMAGERY AND ALLEGORY IN IRISH ART**

*Mary and Brigid* is a double portrait of the artist's sister - Mary Clarke, the mother shown in the painting - and the artist's niece, Bridget Mahon, shown as the child (she is now in her early eighties). The handling of this subject is unusual, however, because of the striking gazes and troubled expressions on the faces of its sitters, as well as

their tense poses. According to Jenkner, the figures are posed in the manner of the Virgin Mary and the Christ child, "with the hieratic, archaic frontality" of an ancient religious icon, though the facial expressions are unorthodox within this tradition (Jenkner 1996a).

Further investigation of the painting's historical and geographical context, as well as consultation with Canadian Irish scholars, suggested that *Mary and Brigid* is much more than a portrait of the artist's relatives. Cyril Byrne, professor of Irish Studies at St. Mary's University, speculates that the female figure posed as the Virgin Mary stands for the Roman Catholic Church, whereas the child, Brigid, stands for Irish Catholicism, as personified by Saint Brigid (Byrne 1996; Jenkner 1996b). If this is the case, the peasant figure of Brigid, in the place of the Christ child, may be seen to represent a return to the culture of precolonial times. Indeed, it will be argued here that this intriguing painting serves as an allegory for Irish identity in a time when expressions of "Irishness" posed social and political resistance to colonisation at the height of tensions for Irish independence from British rule. This interpretation is certainly strengthened by the recent work of contemporary historians and postcolonial writers who clearly link the historical symbolism of Ireland as female in relation to the "colonial feminization of Ireland, adopted, adapted and contested within nationalist discourse" (MacCurtain 1985, 1993; Nash 1993; Innes 1993). Clarke's setting of the scene in the West of Ireland also supports the thesis that *Mary and Brigid* reflects the cultural, as well as national, aspirations in Ireland at the time. Postcolonial theorist Catherine Nash states:

The image of the West stands at the centre of a web of discourses of racial and cultural identity, femininity, sexuality and landscape which were being used in attempts to secure cultural identity and political freedom. (Nash 1993)

"Decoding" the portrait of *Mary and Brigid* by means of its visual clues has proved to be a fascinating lesson in the history of Irish culture and

society. First, the figures, though draped in Irish peasant costume, are obviously not peasants. A comparison of this painting with contemporary genre pictures of the Irish peasantry in the same period reveals a stark contrast in the conventions of representation. In *Mary and Brigid*, the peasants are romanticised, whereas peasant figures in works by contemporaries such as Eileen Murray portray social realism (Jenkner 1996a; McConkey 1990). It appears to have been routine for Irish artists in the early twentieth century to experiment with themes of Irish identity as symbolised by the Irish peasant (MacCurtain 1993; McConkey 1990); and according to some, female peasant imagery bore gender-specific implications, especially in post-independence Ireland (Bhreathnach-Lynch 1997; Nash 1993). Irish art historian Sighle Bhreathnach-Lynch has stated that "the construction of a new Irish post-colonial identity" involved the portrayal of Ireland as "peopled exclusively by a sturdy Gaelic-speaking, Catholic people" in which the Irish female was projected as a "chaste, unsophisticated homemaker and mother." She also points out that the traditional thatched cottage in the landscape of the West of Ireland "came to symbolise the idealisation of the rural family," a native environment in which the Irish mother would play her allotted central role for the new state by reproducing "the Gael," hence also reproducing this specific construction of "Irishness" (Bhreathnach-Lynch 1997). Others concur that this "primitivization of women and the colony," so clearly illustrated in the image of the Irish peasant woman in national costume set against the landscape of the Irish cottage in the West, became "important markers of national identity" in the Gaelic Revival movement of the early twentieth century (Nash 1993).

Thus, the setting of *Mary and Brigid* in the isolated Aran Islands off the west coast, barren of trees, represents quintessential Irishness. Evidently, this painting was one of perhaps a dozen or more of Clarke's works which incorporated "Aran themes."<sup>2</sup> The Aran Islands drew the cultural elite of Ireland like a "Mecca" in the early twentieth century. Renowned Irish artists, writers and playwrights such as the portrait painter (also Clarke's teacher) Sir William Orpen, W.B. Yeats and J.M. Synge

visited and sometimes stayed for long periods. Indeed, it was in the period just prior to the Easter Rising - between 1913 and 1915 - that Margaret Clarke and her husband, Harry Clarke, also visited the Islands, sometimes in the company of other notable Irish figures such as John Keating (Briggs 1994; Jenkner 1996b; Snoddy 1996).

It must be understood that the significance of the Aran Islands to Irish artists and writers is deeply-rooted in Irish history. Ironically, when Cromwell banished the Irish in the 17th century "To Hell or Connacht," driving them to the poorer land in the West, he unwittingly gave the Irish their *Gaeltacht*, in other words, "the place where everything is Irish" (Roughneen 1996). Geographically, isolation meant that the impacts of cultural integration with the British were considerably diminished, and the inhabitants were able to preserve many old Irish traditions, as well as the Gaelic language. The "Gaelic" or "Celtic" Revival which began in the mid-late nineteenth century and continued until WWII represented an attempt by the Irish to rescue their language, religion, and cultural heritage, almost annihilated under the assimilationist tactics of British colonialism. Mass evictions of the Irish from their own lands throughout the "plantation of Ulster," as well as British Penal laws which forbade Catholicism, education or votes for Catholics, and banned the speaking of the Irish language in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, are among the many oppressions the Irish experienced under British rule.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the Aran Islands and the West of Ireland became the locus of the Irish Cultural Revival, largely due to geography and political history.

Other symbols of archaic Irishness in *Mary and Brigid* include the oak tree and the spring located significantly next to the child Brigid. Although the Aran Islands are treeless, the artist painted a wind-blown gnarly oak, which according to some sources, symbolises the ancient temples of the Goddess Brigid (initially, the Celtic goddess of love and fertility) who was later assimilated into the Catholic faith as Saint Brigid. The spring at the base of the tree represents a holy well, quite commonly found near temples, or abbeys (Byrne 1996; Jenkner 1996b). Saint Brigid was the

legendary Abbess of the fifth century monastery at Kildare, which replaced the original pagan sanctuary. Irish folklore is full of stories of how Brigid eventually gave way to Mary, performing heroic deeds on her behalf, in return for which Mary granted her a special feast day of her own, on February 1st. It seems to have been a policy of the early church to convert the feast days and symbols of the Celtic religion to Christian uses (Condren 1989). As one writer points out: "...the figure of Saint Brigit is layered with symbols drawn from pre-Christian Ireland, symbols that have survived the conversion to Christian religion" (Rowley 1997).

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the use of female imagery in this painting exemplifies the centrality of this symbolized woman in Irish culture. In the figures of Brigid, Roisin Dubh, and Cathleen Ni Houlihan, the theme of "Mother Ireland" can be traced. A cross-fertilisation of Irish nationalism and cultural symbols emerge from Irish painting, literature and poetry throughout the Irish struggles for independence (Bhreathnach-Lynch 1997; Innes 1993; MacCurtain 1985, 1993; Nash 1993; Reynolds 1983). In Irish lore, Brigid held the triple roles of Virgin Mother Goddess, Lawmaker and Virgin Saint; the product of a matriloal and matricentred society, she also prefigured the patriarchal trinity of the Roman Catholic Church. Thus, in legend, Brigid inhabited both realms, the Celtic and the Christian, but always as an Irish figure (Condren 1989; Jenkner 1996). The gradual "metamorphosis" of Brigid the Mother Goddess to Brigid the Virgin Saint, and her eventual assimilation to the Cult of the Virgin Mary has been associated with the gradual loss of female religious and secular power in Ireland, as well as with a corresponding increase in patriarchal, ecclesiastical, Roman Catholic and English colonial powers (Condren 1989). One writer has suggested that the "merging of the colonisations - of Irish pagan religion with the Christian Church and later, the Christian colonisation with the English colonisation" - created a complex relationship between Irish women and the Catholic Church:

The Christian Church had erased women's power from the Pagan times and rendered

women inferior to men. Later the Catholic Church - as opposed to the English-identified Protestant Church - would provide women with a native Irish identity and a refuge from English colonialism. Thus in a most unusual twist, while Catholicism and English colonialism would each oppress Irish women, Catholicism would provide an Irish identity, the means for Irish women (and men) to fight English colonialism. This conflict for Irish women lasts to the present day. Today ... what may appear as a Catholic / Protestant conflict in Ulster is more precisely an Irish-English one. (Conway 1992)

For centuries, Irish writers have utilised the female image of Ireland with romantic and patriarchal interpretations in their struggles against oppressive British rule (Innes 1993; MacCurtain 1985; Conway 1992). Indeed, the feminisation of Ireland in colonial representations throughout most of the Irish arts significantly parallels the patriarchal arrangement of male authority (the coloniser) and female subordination (the colonised). "Roisin Dubh" (pronounced "Rosheen Duv") was a love poem written around the sixteenth century during the reign of Elizabeth I in which the poet writes, ostensibly, to his lover. The woman in the poem "My Dark Rosaleen" became the secret symbol for Ireland's attempt to subvert British laws against Catholics as well as to give voice to Irish hopes for independence. In the first and last stanzas, the poet uses the guise of a love poem to kindle Irish nationalism, and hopes for independence:

*O My Dark Rosaleen,  
Do not sigh, do not weep!  
The priests are on the ocean green,  
They march along the Deep...*

*O! The Erne shall run red  
With redundance of Blood,  
The earth shall rock beneath our tread,  
And flames wrap hill and wood,  
And gun-peal and slogan cry,  
Wake many a glen serene.  
Ere you shall fade, ere you shall die,  
My dark Rosaleen! <sup>4</sup>*

From Rosaleen to W.B. Yeats's Cathleen Ni Houlihan in the early twentieth century, the female as a symbol for Ireland has provided a romantic ideal to inspire Irish nationalism. It is, however, as many Irish feminist writers have pointed out, an image which has often been appropriated by a male cultural and political elite and imbued with traditional stereotypes of the "feminine" in the *Aisling*, or vision poetry, specifically as the captive *spéirbhean* (beautiful woman), who serves as a passive image of Ireland "needing to be rescued" (Conway 1992; MacCurtain 1985). In Yeats's play, for example, the heroine "Cathleen" is actually the figure of a captive Ireland seeking a male protector.

Recent writing on gender and national identity in Ireland indicates that there were "several versions of femininity being contested at the time, as part of a set of discourses which participated in the negotiation and inscription of ideas of femininity and, through femininity, the future ideal form of Irish society" (Nash 1993). As some point out, there was a movement afoot amongst nationalists in postindependence Ireland to redefine the new nation in the South in terms of Gaelic masculinity, which in turn relied on the parallel construction of Gaelic femininity (Bhreathnach-Lynch 1997). In other words, the colonised Irish woman - identified with nature and Irish landscape (Bhreathnach-Lynch 1997) - remained subjected, while Irishmen, in the context of a "free" Ireland, became her new coloniser.

However, in *Mary and Brigid* the figures are far from the appearance of feminine vulnerability, female captives in need of a male-led rescue. While there is a romantic staginess in Clarke's portrayal of the Irish peasant, it is not of the swooning kind traditionally attributed by male artists to female symbols of Ireland (Jenkner 1996a). Was Clarke evoking a more ancient image, based on the strength and centrality of Irish women to Celtic society and culture? Was this maternal image subject to a more traditional interpretation of "Irish womanhood?" Perhaps the "Mother Ireland" imagery in the painting is best understood by exploring the career of the artist herself, as well as some of the major social conditions and dominant attitudes shaping women's roles within an Irish society on the brink of revolution and

independence.

## MARGARET CLARKE: A WOMAN ARTIST OF THE IRISH CULTURAL REVIVAL

Born in 1888 into a Catholic family in the North, Margaret Clarke (née Crilley) died in Dublin in 1961. Her father was a technician in the linen industry in Newry, County Down, now part of Northern Ireland; and her mother came from a local farming family (Bourke 1996; Briggs 1994). By Clarke's time, this area was considered to be one of the most "anglicized" parts of Ireland.

Clarke's successful pursuit of an academic painting career indicates two things: that her family supported her choice, and that she was an exceptionally talented young artist. While little has been recorded about her mother, her father has been described as "very clever" and "a writer for the parish," someone who placed a great value on education, and insisted that all of his children receive as good an education as possible. Clarke's formal education began when she attended Newry Technical School from age five to about fourteen. She then trained as a teacher, working for a couple of years as a "monitoress" or teaching assistant. She also played the piano very well and considered a musical career at one stage, but in the end decided that her "real dream was art." Sara Bourke, Clarke's granddaughter, reports family lore that "Clarke set her sights on Dublin for her studies" because she found Newry "constricting and too parochial" (Bourke 1996). No doubt the scholarship she received in 1905 (Snoddy 1996) facilitated her decision considerably. According to historians of women's education in Ireland, young scholars such as Margaret Clarke were among the earliest generations of Catholic women to receive the benefits of educational reforms hard-won by a handful of forward-looking nuns. Following Catholic Emancipation in the early 1800s, such reforms were made possible by a series of progressive legislation in the late nineteenth century which established a more "equal footing" for Irish girls with their male counterparts in school examinations, hence becoming eligible for academic prizes won on merit alone (O'Connor 1987). With her scholarship, Clarke was able to

cover her tuition and bring along her younger sister Mary (the mother seen in *Mary and Brigid*), while she attended the Metropolitan College of Art. In addition, she later supported herself with the money she earned as a painter's assistant once the scholarship ended (Bourke 1996).

When Margaret arrived in Dublin to study art in 1905, she was only seventeen years of age. There she studied under a well-known portrait and landscape painter William Orpen, and met her future husband, Harry Clarke, also a student. (The two sisters, Margaret and Mary, married two brothers, Harry and Walter). Described as "quiet and self-possessed," Clarke became one of Orpen's star pupils, winning a considerable number of medals and awards. It is said that Orpen became her mentor, "greatly admiring her life drawing and oil painting" (Bourke 1996). According to one source, "he regarded her as one of his most promising pupils" (Snoddy 1996). Clarke has been described as a "highly intellectual woman, very well read and cultured." Family members have noted that she always kept an extensive library of the latest novels, books, and criticism. For this, some of her contemporaries, revealing the prevailing androcentrism, had apparently attributed to her a "man's mind" (Bourke 1996). Despite her recognized ability, Clarke's professional achievement as a painter is perhaps more fully understood in the context of the experience of early 20th century Irish women.

When Margaret Clarke began her career, the Irish Cultural Renaissance (Celtic Revival) was at its height; the struggle was on for women's suffrage; and Irish Nationalists, many of whom were women, were engaged in a broadly popular struggle against British colonisation (Cullen Owens 1984; Kiberd, 1995; Luddy and Murphy 1990). According to several sources, women formed the backbone of the renaissance in Irish arts, especially drama, in the nineteenth and early twentieth century (Gordon Bowe 1987; Kiberd 1996; Sawyer 1993). Indeed, Clarke's 1908 class photograph at the Metropolitan Art College shows that the vast majority of students were women (Gordon Bowe 1987).

In this period, strong links emerged between Irish cultural revival and political

movements for independence - one seemed to reinforce the other. As some writers point out, Irish women often took the lead in the Celtic Revival, and sometimes became central figures in Irish nationalist struggles. The "Daughters of Erin" were founded in 1900 with the explicit purpose of "de-anglicising" the Irish population, by providing free lessons in Irish history, Gaelic, Irish music and dancing. By 1914, this organisation had been absorbed into a purely nationalist cause as *Cumann na mBan* (meaning "a company of women") when it became the sister organisation to the "Irish Volunteers," militant Irish nationalists (Cullen Owens 1984; Sawyer 1993; Taillon 1993; Ward 1983, 1996).

The early twentieth century in Ireland gave rise to feminist as well as nationalist struggles. Like many women in other western nations at this time, Irish women sought to enter higher education and gain suffrage along with other equal rights. Historians of women's education in Ireland draw some very strong links between the late 19th century educational reforms for Irish girls, advancements for women in higher education, an increase in employment opportunities and the overall central role of Irish women in nationalist movements of the early 20th century (MacCurtain 1985; O'Connor 1987). The notable Irish feminist historian Margaret MacCurtain writes:

The late 1870s threw public examinations open to girls and women. For the first time, girls' schools in Ireland could participate in public examinations and avail of entry into careers and professions. The effect of the 1878 Intermediate [Education] Act on Irish women cannot be overestimated. It achieved a major revolution in their economic and educational aspirations which brought Irish women in the late 19th and early 20th centuries under the spell of the liberalising influences of the feminist movement in America and Britain ....[H]igher education for middle class Irish women brought them not only economic freedom and university honours but in the early 20th century brought



them, by various routes, into the revolutionary experience that led to the founding of the Free State in the South in 1922. (MacCurtain 1985)

No doubt, the leadership of Irish women in the Cultural Renaissance also helped to facilitate an increase of female representation in various fields of fine arts in the early twentieth century. Painting was no exception in this regard, although it was among the most conservative of the fine arts practices. It should be understood, however, that the nature of "conservatism" in the Arts establishment had as much to do with the "Englishness" of Irish cultural institutions by the early twentieth century, as with the paternalistic, or patriarchal nature of the establishment itself. In Clarke's day, any advanced education in Ireland was essentially a British institution, with British values and standards. With the onset of the Free State in the early 1920s, art historians describe a prevalent perception of Ireland as "a cultural desert" and a "general belief that art was middle-class, foreign, and worst of all associated with the former British masters" (Bhreathnach-Lynch 1996). Perhaps this is why Clarke sought out alternative venues in the arts throughout this period. As an associate member in The Academy of Christian Art, founded in 1929, Clarke would have supported its objective "to give a free voice to a Catholic community..." (Kennedy 1991). The conservative institutions of higher education in Ireland would have deeply affected Clarke's experience as a Irish Catholic female artist.

Although women played leading roles in the Celtic Renaissance, professional Irish women painters continued to be actively excluded from the Royal Hibernian Academy of Arts (RHA), the organisation of officially recognised artists in Dublin (Gordon Bowe 1987). Slowly, however, Irish women artists, usually of exceptional merit, were able to make inroads into the RHA, and achieve professional recognition in Ireland. A contemporary of Clarke, Sara Purser (1848-1943), was the first woman artist to receive official recognition by the RHA - albeit initially a purely honorary distinction (HRHA) in 1890, and much later RHA in 1925 - and this, after many years of

accomplished work in painting, design and stained glass. Clarke became the second woman to join the ranks of fully recognised academic painters with that same title in 1927, after being elected an Associate (ARHA) in 1926. The general exclusion of women from the RHA, and general lack of exposure may well have led Irish women artists such as Margaret Clarke to become part of The Society of Dublin Painters, a group described as "very female," providing an alternative venue to the Academy for young artists to show their work in the 1920s. But perhaps it was public opinion, as some suggest, in the climate of Irish women's suffrage, which eventually persuaded the Irish arts establishment to permit accomplished women artists to put RHA behind their names (Gordon Bowe 1987).

Clearly, Clarke's recognition by the Royal Hibernian Academy proves that she was considered to be an exceptional artist. According to several sources, her work was exhibited in Europe and North America, along with that of other renowned, mostly male, Irish artists of her generation (O'Ceirín 1996; Snoddy 1996). Augmenting her professional achievements, Clarke's marriage in 1914 to the much better known stained glass artist and illustrator Harry Clarke further buttressed her position (Gordon Bowe 1983, 1989). According to family lore, Clarke's art was generally underrated by comparison to her husband. She proved, however, a very capable business woman, as well as accomplished artist. Throughout Harry Clarke's illness and after his death from tuberculosis in 1931, she continued to develop the family business, Harry Clarke Stained Glass Studios Ltd., in north Dublin. At this time, it is said, the Studio became the main source of the family's income, in addition to Clarke's portrait practice. According to her granddaughter, "Margaret's life became quite a struggle" as she continued to paint, direct the Studio, and bring up three young children on her own: a daughter named Ann (Sara's mother), and two sons, Michael and David. It was at this difficult time, apparently, that Clarke became increasingly involved in large portrait commissions rather than independent work for exhibition. One exception to this was her practice of painting her own children, Ann, Michael and David, where she could often be

more experimental (Bourke 1996). These portraits might be said to exhibit a much more adventurous spirit, consistent with the inventiveness of *Mary and Brigid* (Jenkner 1996a). Clarke's portrait commissions included such distinguished Irish figures as Eamon DeValera, Archbishop McQuaid, Lennox Robinson and the President of the Royal Hibernian Academy, Dermot O'Brien (Snoddy 1996).

Although a few allegorical paintings by Clarke have been documented (Snoddy 1996), her reputation rested on portraiture. Thus, *Mary and Brigid*, which straddled the genres of portraiture and allegorical painting, remains distinct from Clarke's later and better known work. There are several possible explanations for the atypical status of this painting within the artist's oeuvre. The first is her eventual pursuit of commercial portrait painting, from financial necessity. Another is her response to the nationalist and cultural aspirations of the politically turbulent period, following the brutal suppression of the Easter Rising of 1916. The artist's assessment of her own achievement in *Mary and Brigid* may be inferred from the value shown against it in exhibition lists from 1917-1924. At £50, the painting is among the highest priced works in her 1924 solo exhibition at St. Stephen's Green Gallery (Stewart 1996).

While all available evidence thus far indicates that Margaret Clarke was clearly no "radical" nationalist painter, there can be little doubt that she was influenced by a cultural and political milieu in Ireland which sought to reclaim its Celtic roots. According to her granddaughter, Sara Bourke, Clarke was well acquainted with prominent nationalist leaders such as Countess Constance Markievicz (Bourke 1996), one of the 77 Irish women Volunteers who were arrested for their roles in the assault on Dublin Castle during the Easter Rising, 1916. (Taillon 1996; Ward 1983, 1996). Bourke suggests, however, that the Clarkes maintained more of a "cultural perspective" as neither was politically active:

The family attitude was more an artisan one of "[T]hey are destroying our beautiful city" than encouragement for the fighting. They would best have been

described as armchair republicans, and would have opposed partition... [Margaret] would have course have known many of [the cultural elite of the Irish Cultural Revival]. Lennox Robinson, one of the directors of the Abbey Theatre, was a close family friend. Harry was involved on the periphery of the cultural revival, but his interest was more in the Arts and Crafts Movement than in the nationalist agenda. (Bourke 1996)

According to a biography of Harry Clarke, the Clarkes experienced firsthand the effects of the Rising as they each lost some of their art work during the fires of Easter week, 1916. The Harry Clarke Studios, located in the central area of Dublin, was affected by the fighting and many of the pictures housed in the premises of the R.H.A. were destroyed, including some of Margaret Clarke's portraits (Gordon Bowe 1989).

Several exhibitions of *Mary and Brigid*, once in 1917 at the RHA, and again in 1924 at the Nationalist Art Fair "Aonach Tailteann" and St. Stephen's Green Gallery, attest to the amount of public interest it seemed to stir. In the Nationalist Art Fair event, which was very accessible to the general public, Clarke won a bronze medal for her work, a group of four paintings which included *Mary and Brigid* (*The Irish Times*, August 6, 1924). This event was part of a larger celebration known as the "Aonach Tailteann Games," including sports and music as well as art competitions, a ninth century Irish tradition of tribal assemblies suppressed until 1922, after Irish Independence from Britain. Under the heading "Ancient Festival Revived," Irish media highlighted the games as a celebration of the new Free State within an international venue (*Irish Times*, Mon., August 4, 1924; Nally 1922; Gordon Bowe 1987).

The political significance of the period within which *Mary and Brigid* received such recognition should not be overlooked. While what is known of the response in the local press and the critical establishment of Dublin is currently limited, there is a clear indication that Clarke was highly praised for this painting. Contemporary Irish media rendered it a "clever handling" of the subject, "an



outstanding picture," which "was received with enthusiasm."<sup>5</sup> However, the primary focus of the media commentary surrounding this work was somewhat formalist rather than ideological; possibly, given the artist's academic style, critics found it difficult to recognise what was radical about this painting. Another explanation lies in the way Irish art critics commonly handled art throughout this period, confining their comments primarily to a discussion of form and features. Nevertheless, the fact that Clarke's painting was received with "enthusiasm," as "clever" and "outstanding" at a time when Ireland had just formed a Free State in the South deserves further attention.

### **MARY & BRIGID: A FEMINIST HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**

Such a favourable popular response to *Mary and Brigid* may be attributed in part to an agreeable cultural and political climate, or perhaps for the subtle nature of its genre in a highly volatile period of Irish history. Certainly the subject of the painting would have lent itself quite well to several different interpretations of "Irishness." The partition which created the "Free State" as well as the British jurisdiction of "Northern Ireland" was enacted in 1922, just two years prior to the final exhibition of *Mary and Brigid*. Some suggest that it is significant that Margaret Clarke was honoured by admission to the Royal Hibernian Academy as a full academician in 1927, immediately after Irish independence was achieved in the South of Ireland. In this regard, the post-independence exhibition of her painting in overtly nationalist venues may have been her ticket to success in the new political climate (Jenkner 1996a).

The cultural overtones, hence political undertones, of *Mary and Brigid* have marked a significant moment in both the career of Margaret Clarke, and the peak of Irish nationalism in the early 20th century. Art curator Ingrid Jenkner has pointed out that the "allegorical painting was prized above landscape, portrait and still life because of its intellectual complexity, and the challenges it presented to the artist who had to stage manage the production of an intelligible double narrative"

(Jenkner 1996a). In this sense, the figures in the painting can be interpreted on a variety of levels: as a family portrait; a *Madonna and child* subject; and on another level, as a defiant and resilient people, facing their colonial oppressors.

While it may be all of the above, *Mary and Brigid* is clearly a product of its time and place. Although we cannot pretend to know the author's intentions, this painting speaks volumes when examined in the context of the cultural nationalist genre of "Mother Ireland," and in relation to the significance of the peasant and Aran landscape in the construction of Irish identity. Was Clarke alluding to an "Irishness" linked to Catholicism? To pre-Christian Ireland? Or both? Does the maternal and female imagery reflect the idealised Irish motherhood aspired to within a post-independent Catholic Ireland? Or are they maternal symbols of a more revolutionary nature?

Women of the Irish Cultural Revival and later female revolutionaries of the 1916 Rising drew heavily upon pre-colonial Celtic imagery of women as goddesses, warriors and citizens with extensive rights under the Brehon laws in early Irish society (Conway 1992; MacCurtain 1985). Such imagery, one might argue, enabled Irish women of the early twentieth century to link nationalist and feminist aspirations, and in this way, to facilitate their aspirations for direct participation in the revolutionary movement in Ireland. The maternal imagery represented in religious / cultural figures such as *Mary and Brigid* simultaneously came to "symbolise the unity of Irish culture," and "a celebration of Irish motherhood" (Condren 1989). But it seems that whereas Irish feminists and nationalists saw motherhood as the "rationale for extending women's public roles" (Valiulis 1995), many others saw it as a rationale for restricting women's roles to the private domain in a post-independent Ireland. In part, the eventual conflict between nationalist and feminist aspirations (Cullen Owens 1984; Ward 1983) caused Irish women themselves, as some notable Irish historians have pointed out, to exhibit "a deep perplexity about their true identity as citizens" (MacCurtain 1985). Another Irish writer has indicated that in "postcolonial southern Ireland a particular construction of sexual and familial roles became the

very substance of what it meant to be Irish" (Meaney 1993). Leaders of both the Irish suffrage movement and women's militant nationalist organisations, however, were to "contest the conservative definition of Irish womanhood" as prescribed by male-led Irish governments in the Free State and Republic of Ireland (Valiulis 1995; Ward 1996).

Many revolutionary Irish women of Clarke's generation saw nationalist struggles for independence bound intimately with feminist struggles for equal female citizenship rights. Indeed, in partial recognition of women's central role in the Irish fight for independence, the Republican Proclamation of 1916 had earlier guaranteed "religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens" (Ward 1996). Yet, the establishment of the Irish Free State of the 1920s and the later Republic of the 1930s failed to realise this feminist vision as both the laws and the attitudes of a ruling male elite came increasingly under the influence of ecclesiastical authorities. Despite the granting of equal suffrage to Irish women in 1922, women lost numerous rights under the Free State including: workers' rights on an "equal footing" with men in the labour force; the right to serve on juries; and access to divorce. In the 1930s, the diminishment of Irish women's status under the Republic continued as they were forbidden access to information about contraceptives and lost further rights as workers under a marriage bar and protective legislation (Conway 1992; MacCurtain 1985; Valiulis 1995). The 1937 Irish Constitution, designed by President Eamonn de Valera under the advice of a Jesuit priest, clearly circumscribed the role of the Irish woman within the "home and hearth." Her value to the newly independent nation would consist of "producing and educating sons to be good and virtuous citizens" (Valiulis 1995). Indeed, some have suggested that Irish womanhood in the period of post-independence became the location for establishing the new state's "respectability" as a "civilised society" within which a "Victorian value system, the teachings of the Catholic Church, and the needs of the emerging middle class" coincided (Nash 1993; Valiulis 1995). However, the militant female suffragists and revolutionaries of 1916

clearly did not fit this new mold of post-colonial respectability:

This threat to the male monopoly of political power by politically active women intensified the drive to fix the role, position and the very nature of womanhood. These issues overlapped with concerns of cultural purity and preservation, centred on the image of the West of Ireland as an Irish cultural region, whose physical landscape provided the greatest contrast to the landscape of Englishness. Onto the body of the peasant woman were focused the concerns over racial, sexual and cultural purity and the social and moral organisation of a future independent Ireland. (Nash 1993)

Under the conditions of "sexual conservatism and political stagnation" of post-independence Ireland, one writer suggests that:

...women became the guarantors of their men's status, bearers of national honour and the scapegoats of national identity. They were not merely transformed into symbols of the nation. They became the territory over which power is exercised. (Meaney 1993)

Thus, "Irishness" for women in an independent Ireland was equated with the "moral motherhood" (Valiulis 1995) defined by ecclesiastical, mostly Catholic, authorities, rather than an association with the "citizen motherhood" pursued by the early 20th century Irish feminists and nationalists. Whether the maternal symbolism of *Mary and Brigid* falls into either category is largely dependent on the meaning which contemporary viewers may have attributed to this painting. What is certain, however, is that the artist Margaret Clarke resurrected a powerful ancient female Irish image in a significantly revolutionary context - a time when Irish women were being called upon to help liberate Ireland.

The historical significance of this work is therefore three-fold. First, its layers of Celtic and Christian Irish symbols, quite commonplace at the height of the Gaelic Revival Movement, allow the

painting to stand as both an Irish portrait and a sophisticated expression of Irish culture. Second, the fact that *Mary and Brigid* was successfully exhibited in the Irish nationalist contexts of post-revolution and post-independence Ireland highlights the significant intersection between culture and politics at a time when Irish artists were reclaiming and recasting their national identity. Last and perhaps most important, this work is located at a critical crossroads of Irish nationalist and feminist aspirations amongst the women of Margaret Clarke's generation. The distinctive symbols of Irishness, especially the female and maternal peasant imagery of *Mary and Brigid*, would have lent credence to several different interpretations of "Mother Ireland" in post-revolutionary and post-independent Ireland. However, in this picture the female symbolism reveals strong, defiant, wise-looking figures, quite uncharacteristic of many nationalist symbols

portraying Irish women as passive, typically feminine, colonial representations of Ireland. In this sense, *Mary and Brigid* can be regarded as a more complex, and perhaps more revolutionary representation of Irish womanhood in the Mother Ireland genre, one that may have carried the vision of Irish nationalist women for equal citizenship in a free nation, however thwarted they were in the postcolonial realities of an independent state.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Acknowledgements include: Ingrid Jenkner, Director of the MSVU Art Gallery, my main collaborator in this research; Frances Early; Sara Bourke; Gaby Roughneen; Cyril Byrne; Sighle Bhreathnach-Lynch; Carla Briggs; and Kevin Callaghan.

## ENDNOTES

1. Ingrid Jenkner, my collaborator in this project, and I presented versions of this paper on two occasions: in 1996 during the Women's History Month series on "Women and Art" at MSVU, and in 1997 at the Canadian Women's Studies conference, at The Learned Societies Congress, Memorial University of Newfoundland, St. John's, Newfoundland.
2. Some of these can be found listed in the catalogue of Margaret Clarke's work: *Catalogue: Solo Exhibition*, St. Stephen's Green Gallery, April 3-16, 1924. Other sketches and paintings with the Aran theme may be found in private collections. Also, see Carla Briggs, "Margaret Clarke: Life and Work," MA thesis, University College Dublin, 1994.
3. See some useful general sources on Irish history for further information: Edmund Curtis, *A History of Ireland*. New York: Methuen, 1936; John O'Beirne Ranelagh, *A Short History of Ireland*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983; and R.F. Foster, *Modern Ireland*. London: Penguin Books, 1988.
4. See: Kathleen Hoagland, ed. *1000 Years of Irish Poetry: The Gaelic and Anglo-Irish Poets from Pagan Times to the Present*. Connecticut: The Devin-Adair Co., 1981, pp. 142-45.
5. See commentary on the painting in reviews of the Solo Exhibition in *The Irish Statesman*, April 12, 1924; *Freeman's Journal*, April 3, 1924; *The Irish Times*, April 4, 1924 and August 6, 1924. Consultations with Carla Briggs revealed that media reviews of *Mary and Brigid* refer only briefly to the painting (Briggs 1997). Further examination of the public's response to the painting around the period 1917 to 1924 in which it was exhibited is necessary in order to more fully clarify its impact as a work of cultural nationalism.

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